Escalante Massacre, 31 years ago today

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The following account is taken from the narration of events given by participants Eddie and Alma Villalon, in an interview with Bantayog researchers Carrie Panaligan-Manglinong and Cathy Abrazado, August 2, 2013, in Escalante City.

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It was September 20, 1985, and President Marcos had declared it to be a "Thanksgiving Day" to celebrate the "New Society" under his iron-fisted rule.

The people had nothing to be thankful for. Years of corruption, self-enrichment by the Marcos family and their cronies, subservience to foreign interests, the unrelenting violation of human rights had become like a deadweight that was pulling the Philippines down. There was massive public debt. Investors were pulling out of the economy. The effects of the crisis were being felt all over the country, and most especially by the poor.

The murder of Sen. Benigno Aquino Jr. in August 1983 had accelerated the demand for the ouster of the dictatorship. More and bigger rallies and demonstrations were held. People's organizations, creatively named, emerged at all levels. New forms of mass protest, such as the "lakbayan," mobilized hundreds of thousands of Filipinos all determined to express their resistance to oppression. The traditional elites were sharply divided: some began to side openly with the opposition, while others beefed up their private armies.

Still pretending (for the benefit of his patrons in the government of the United States) that his dictatorship was a democracy, Marcos announced the holding of a presidential election. He even picked his own opponent, an old friend from Bulacan, to run against him.

By this time, there were only a few places in the Philippines that could be considered "Marcos country." Almost everywhere, Filipinos were overcoming their fear of martial law. Thus, the call to boycott the bogus election received tremendous, open support.

People's strike in Negros

A three-day people's strike ("welgang bayan") had been declared in the entire island of Negros against "hunger, extreme poverty and increasing militarization." Although the sugar industry had brought fabulous wealth to the ruling landlord families there, such riches were made possible by the inhuman labor and social conditions to which the plantation workers and their families were subjected.

The Negros Occidental provincial governor then was Armando (Armin) Gustilo, who was known to be extremely loyal to Marcos. His armed bodyguards enjoyed paramilitary status as a Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), operating together with the regular military and police units.

The strike in Negros saw the paralysis of public transportation, as the members of 28 bus and jeepney drivers associations refused to ply their routes. Public and private schools suspended classes. Offices and some business establishments were closed. Rallies and marches were held, peacefully, in the major city of Bacolod and the towns of Binalbagan and Kabankalan.

The people of northern Negros decided to hold their own welgang bayan from Sept.19 to 21, with their activities centered in Escalante City (98 kilometers away from Bacolod). In the morning of Sept. 20, about 7,000 had already gathered in two places – some in front of the municipal hall, and others blocking the road going to Bacolod.

Many soldiers were deployed in the area, in full battle gear including high-powered firearms. Firetrucks arrived with CHDF personnel aboard. To relieve their tension, the people started clapping and shouting : “Makibaka! Huwag matakot!”, “Militarisasyon labanan!” (Let’s fight, don’t be afraid! Resist militarization!)

The firetrucks began to pump water at the protesters, but ran out of water. Then the CHDF men started firing tear gas canisters into the crowd. One canister fell near Juvelyn Jaravelo, a young woman who was in the front ranks, and she picked it up and threw it back. At that point the CHDF began shooting, and Jaravelo was the first to be hit. Suddenly, the machine gun mounted on the rooftop of the municipal hall also spitting out automatic fire. People were running in all directions, while others linked arms and stayed put. Many bodies were lying on the ground.

After the shooting stopped, more troops arrived and encircled the survivors, who thought they were sure to die. But a door suddenly opened in the market, and everyone rushed inside, making their way to safety in the town convent. From there they saw how the CHDF were firing more bullets at the wounded lying everywhere, still alive.

Fifteen people died instantly in the Escalante massacre. Six more died in hospitals and very many were injured. The terror continued as soldiers were present in the hospitals, intimidating the doctors and other medical personnel.

The Escalante massacre shocked the entire country. It was the first time that so many people – 21 in all – were killed in just one attack by government forces. The anger that it provoked added fuel to the citizens’ determination to oust the dictatorship. And indeed the people’s

resistance to the brutal and corrupt Marcos dictatorship bore fruit less than six months after, on February 26-28, 1986.

The first anniversary of the massacre — with the dictator Marcos and his family finally out of Malacañang Palace – was a collective commemoration by the people of Escalante. Since then, September 20 has been an annual day of mourning and prayer, declared as such by the local city council. On this day, they reenact the tragic event and recount the inspiring stories of heroism and solidarity that they witnessed. Some years later, an impressive monument to the martyrs of Escalante was erected in the town plaza.